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Case Against Shcharansky Invented, Yurchenko Said

By ROBERT C. TOTH, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—Vitaly S. Yurchenko, the KGB official who defected for several months to the United States last year, told U.S. interrogators before he decided to return to the Soviet Union that the Kremlin's secret police had invented the spy case against Anatoly Shcharansky, the human rights activist who was sentenced to 13 years of incarceration in 1978. The Times has learned.

Yurchenko's information, which U.S. officials have confirmed, was quietly conveyed to Kremlin political officials and particularly to Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev in an effort to force a review of the KGB evidence against Shcharansky.

President Reagan, when asked about the possible release of Shcharansky last week, said he had "a conversation with Mr. Gorbachev at the Geneva summit about things of this kind." Sources said that although Reagan raised Shcharansky's case in Geneva, it is not known whether he specifically mentioned Yurchenko's information.

The Reagan Administration hoped that a reexamination of the reported evidence would result in Shcharansky's release, which finally took place Tuesday in West Berlin. The United States has always insisted that Shcharansky is innocent, and U.S. officials, in discussing Yurchenko's information, said that Gorbachev may have been sincerely convinced by the KGB of Shcharansky's guilt.

Whether Yurchenko's disclosures had any effect is not known but, as one U.S. official said, the information cannot have hurt.

The Times has known about Yurchenko's revelations for more than two months but agreed to withhold the story after U.S. officials expressed fear that its appearance would embarrass the Soviets and jeopardize chances of Shcharansky's release.

Yurchenko defected by walking into the U.S. Embassy in Rome last Aug. 1 and was in CIA custody until Nov. 2, when he walked out of a Washington restaurant where he had been dining with a CIA security officer. In a press conference at the Soviet Embassy here the next

day, Yurchenko claimed that he had been drugged, kidnapped and forcibly detained in the United States.

U.S. officials have not denied that Yurchenko may have been handled insensitively during his interrogation but said he redefected primarily because he had been jilted by a woman KGB agent he loved and whom he failed to persuade to join him in a new life here. She was assigned to Canada, where Yurchenko was taken to meet her during his three months in CIA custody.

Yurchenko, 49, was stationed in the Soviet Embassy here for five years in the late 1970s as a KGB security and counterintelligence official overseeing Soviet personnel, U.S. officials said. After he returned to Moscow from that assignment, he rose to become the deputy head of that security and counterintelligence division in KGB headquarters there.

In that job, he would have had access to the Shcharansky file, officials said.

Yurchenko did not offer evidence supporting his disclosures that the case had been a KGB invention, or on any other matter, officials said. However, his information on two men who spied for the Soviets, former CIA agent Edward L. Howard and former National Security Agency employee Ronald W. Pelton, proved to be correct, as have other disclosures that have not been revealed, officials said.

In addition, the case against Shcharansky has eroded, even to some degree in Soviet publications. He was reportedly charged with

collecting information on Soviet defense research institutes for the CIA, for example, but a recent Soviet book blames another Jewish "refusenik" for that alleged crime.

Shcharansky, a 37-year-old computer specialist, was a principal founder, and perhaps creator, of the Helsinki Monitoring Group, which critically compared Soviet human rights behavior with the standard of Soviet promises under the 1975 Helsinki Agreements on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The group brought together disparate dissident elements in the Soviet Union. These included Jews, Armenians and Volga Germans seeking to emigrate, democrats seeking political and social reforms, Pentecostals and Baptists seeking freedom of religious worship, Crimean Tatars seeking return of their historic homeland from which Josef Stalin uprooted them and others.

Soon after Shcharansky's arrest on March 10, 1977, the chairman of the Helsinki Group, Yuri Orlov, also was arrested and sentenced to 12 years—seven in labor camp, five in internal exile—under a Soviet law that forbids anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda criticizing the regime.

Shcharansky, charged with anti-Soviet agitation and espionage, received 13 years—three in prison and 10 in labor camp. Former

President Jimmy Carter took the highly unusual step of specifically denying that Shcharansky was an American spy. Officials in his Administration said pointedly at the time that the Soviets knew Shcharansky was not a spy.

Perhaps because of this direct challenge to the Soviets, both on Shcharansky and on the broader range of human rights causes, which Carter sought to champion, the Kremlin adamantly refused to consider releasing Shcharansky until now.

And, although Shcharansky encountered serious difficulties with his health, he was kept in prison for six years, rather than being transferred to the relatively easier life in labor camp after three years, in keeping with the original sentence. His prison term had been extended by three years, allegedly because he was disobedient to authorities and had a bad influence on other prisoners.

He specifically rejected the request of his mother and brother in Moscow and his wife, Avital, in Israel, to ask for clemency after serving half of his sentence. He reportedly told them that the petition might be cited by the Soviets as proof that he was guilty.

Robert C. Toth of The Times Washington Bureau wrote this story there before flying to Israel for the arrival of Anatoly Shcharansky.